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A Vedda Propitiation Ceremony.

The Veddas are the remnants of what may for convenience be referred to as the aboriginal inhabitants of Ceylon. They are found exclusively in that part of the island,—the greater part of it wild jungle country,—which is bounded on the north by the Verugal Aar, on the east by the sea, on the south by the Gal Oya, and on the west by the central mountain *massif* and the middle reaches of the Mahaweliganga. They vary greatly from group to group in the degree to which they have intermarried with their Sinhalese or Tamil neighbours, and have adopted those neigh-

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bours' language, customs, and manner of life. In a few of the remoter forest fastnesses of the interior there are still to be found more or less pure-blooded Veddas who continue to support life by the precarious *chena* cultivation and by hunting: but in addition to these pure-blooded Veddas, who are a very feeble folk indeed in point of numbers, the inhabitants of many of what are generally recognized as Sinhalese villages, and the so-called "coast Veddas," who have their settlements in a few places along the eastern coast to the north of Batticaloa, are to a greater or less extent of Vedda origin. The Veddas as a race have been visited and described by C. G. and B. Z. Seligmann [1] and more recently by Dr. R. L. Spittel [2] of Colombo. Of the coast Veddas the Seligmanns say,—"although these coast Veddas, or Verdas as they call themselves, have intermarried with the Tamils and have adopted many Tamil customs, they still have remains of the old clan system of the Veddas, and although they usually speak Tamil, the majority of them say they have a language of their own which they consider to be the old Vedda language, and which was found to be Sinhalese. They have roughly-built temples, and we were told independently in two settlements that the chief agency worshipped was called Kapalpe or Kabalpe, *i.e.*, "ship spirit." At first we feared some misunderstanding, but when one of us was shown within one of their temples, into which after some trouble he was allowed to penetrate, a small model of a ship partly square rigged was seen, and it was stated that at a special ceremony this was hoisted to the top of a pole some thirty feet tall which stood outside the temple." [3] The ceremony to be described in what follows appears to be in fact that conducted for the propitiation of this "ship spirit" and of the goddess Ammal, and, if so, it is that which the Seligmanns saw rehearsed, in part at any rate, at Vakarai.[4] The description, therefore, imperfect and perhaps inaccurate in some details as it may be, being

[1] C. G. and B. Z. Seligmann, *The Veddas*. See also *Spolia Zeylanica*, vol. v, Part xx, Dec. 1908, pp. 133 *et seq.*

[2] R. L. Spittel, *Wild Ceylon*.

[3] C. G. and B. Z. Seligmann, *Spolia Zeylanica*, vol. v, Part xx, Dec. 1908, pp. 136, 137.

[4] *The Veddas*, pp. 333-9.

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written from memory aided by not very adequate notes made shortly after the ceremony, helps to fill up a lacuna in the hitherto published records of Vedda customs and ritual. 121 796

In June of 1925 I was engaged, as a junior administrative officer, in dealing with an outbreak of cholera among the Muslim tobacco cultivators in the neighbourhood of a remote coast Vedda village, about forty-four miles north of Batticaloa on the Batticaloa-Trincomalee coast road. Investigation by the medical officer with whom I was associated soon revealed the fact that the focus of the infection was a yet more remote inland district lying behind that part of the coast, and that to grapple effectively with the disease it would be necessary to evacuate the population of that area and to concentrate it, for the treatment of the actually sick and for the segregation of the "contacts," in the comparatively accessible locality where we had already established ourselves, not far from the spot where the first cases to be brought to our notice had occurred. I therefore found myself obliged, at short notice, to enlarge the camp of which I had already begun the construction, and in particular to begin the building of a new hospital hut on a more grandiose scale than that originally contemplated. For the work of construction, which consisted of the erection of a framework of jungle sticks and the covering of it with *cadjans*,—dried and plaited palm branches,—according to the familiar village method, it was necessary to enlist the services of the coast Veddas of the adjoining settlement. The villagers were naturally reluctant to engage in work which they not unreasonably supposed would expose them to the infection, and it called for much tact and persuasiveness on the part of the Chief Headman of the *pallu* to get them to do so. Fully realising that, apart from all other considerations, the occurrence of even one case of cholera among them would effectively put a stop to all co-operation, the Chief Headman and I took, successfully as the event showed, every possible precaution to prevent such a catastrophe. Everything seemed to be going on without let or hindrance when the Chief Headman upset my calculations by announcing that the work must cease for twelve hours on the 8th of June, to enable the villagers to perform a ceremony in honour of the *Pariya Devi* 123 [131 361] [796 979]

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(Great Goddess).[1] It was in vain that I pointed out the urgency of the work and protested against any delay, even going the length of suggesting that the ceremony should be postponed. After a good deal of futile argument I was obliged to resign myself to the inevitable.

My chagrin was to some extent lessened when the Chief Headman approached me with an invitation from the people to be present at the ceremony. The invitation was welcome, for it offered an alternative to an evening spent in the company only of a book and of my own thoughts in the solitude of the one-roomed "rest house" where I had my temporary quarters. It was accordingly arranged that the Chief Headman should come to fetch me after my dinner.

The moon,—full two days before,—had already risen when the Chief Headman and his following of village notables emerged from the shadows of the jungle bordering the high road. I got up from the long chair in which I had been sitting on the verandah and joined them, and we set off northwards along the road. After walking along it for about half a mile we turned off to the right through alternate thick jungle and open spaces overgrown with *illuk*-grass, and with here and there a solitary tree casting a deep black shadow under the white light of the moon, in the direction of the mouth of the river which crossed the high road about three and a half miles to the north of our camp. We had gone in this way perhaps a mile in all when I began to be aware of the rhythmical throbbing of a tom-tom, at first only faint in the distance, somewhere ahead in the jungle. I recollect well the feeling of growing excitement as the sound grew gradually louder and more insistent with our advance. Another mile, and the path which our party was following, at that point through thick jungle, took a sharp turn to the right, and we suddenly found ourselves in a large circular clearing, surrounded by high timber. To our right as we entered were the spectators, squatted upon the ground in rows and facing towards that part of the enclosure which lay to our left. Even the fringes of the jungle seemed to be

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[1] This goddess is presumably the goddess Amma, "who sends small-pox and skin diseases": see *The Veddas*, p. 236.

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full of people. To our left was a shrine set up against the jungle wall in that quarter. In a space left clear in front of the shrine stood what can best be described as a sort of "maypole," and between the "maypole" and the spectators was a small area enclosed by lengths of coloured cloth stretched between upright sticks. Within this area could be seen a small temporary booth, with human figures moving about a fire, over which, the Chief Headman informed me, rice was being cooked to be offered to the goddess.

When we reached the clearing the ceremony had not yet begun. I was conducted to a seat of honour in the front row of the spectators, and sat there for some minutes looking round with interest on the scene, which was lighted here and there by the flare of torches, and listening to the monotonous throb of the tom-tom, which was apparently being played somewhere close by in the jungle. Suddenly the tom-tom took on a more staccato note. Excitement rose among the spectators; and presently, from a gap in the jungle wall on my right and rather behind me as I sat facing the shrine, there defiled into the clearing a procession which slowly threaded its way through the ranks of the spectators to the clear space in front of the shrine. In this procession there were carried two wooden ceremonial swords,[6] which were to be prominent in the dances which followed. In front of the shrine the procession stopped, and a ritual of some sort, the exact nature of which it was impossible to gather in the semi-darkness, was gone through.

At the conclusion of the ritual at the shrine a red flag, bearing embroidered upon it the sun and moon and two human figures, and another device the details of which I was unable to distinguish, but which was possibly the figure of a ship, the emblem of Kapalpe, was hoisted upon the "maypole." This was, perhaps, the formal beginning of the ceremony, for after the hoisting of the flag flowers were brought in baskets, as a mark of respect, to the Chief Headman and myself. Under the Chief Headman's

[6] These swords resembled the ceremonial swords (*ran hadunu*) seen by the Seligmanns *only* in the ceremony of the invocation of Rahu Yaku at Situla Wanniya, (fifty miles from the place at which the ceremony here described was performed), and illustrated on p. 236 of *The Veddas*.

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123 796 guidance I touched the flowers in acknowledgement. After this the rice which had meanwhile been cooked in the enclosure in front of the shrine was offered to the goddess at the shrine, and the enclosure itself was removed.

The offering of the rice appeared to mark the conclusion of the first stage of the ceremony, for it was followed by a procession of those who were to take part in the subsequent dancing,—apparently accompanied by the image of the goddess,—out of the clearing and, as I was informed, down to the river about half a mile away for the sacred bath.

Time dragged by. The moonlight flooded the clearing, showing the ranks of the spectators sitting in their places with oriental patience and talking in undertones. At last the procession of dancers re-entered the clearing and advanced to the open space in front of the shrine. Here a ritual was gone through which seemed to be intended to induce in the dancers a state of "possession," [7] and after the performance of this ritual the dances began.

First of all two principal dancers, wearing what were evidently ceremonial jackets of red cloth, took, each of them, in one hand one of the wooden swords previously mentioned and in the other [535] a bunch of leaves, and went in and out among the people with a queer shuffling step and a curious rhythmic brandishing of the swords and leaves. Once or twice the leader stopped, and laying his sword upon the head of some person in the crowd began to [787] prophesy.[8] One prophecy, as interpreted to me by the Chief Headman, concerned the outbreak of cholera, and was in the form

[7] The Seligmanns, on pp. 134-5 of *The Veddas*, discuss at some length the nature of "possession" in the Vedda ritual dances.

[8] My impression at the time was that in uttering these prophecies the leader of the dance used the Vedda language. Certainly the language used did not appear to me to be either Sinhalese or Tamil. It is true that the Seligmanns say, in the passage quoted in the text, that the "old Vedda language" as spoken by the coast Veddas was found to be Sinhalese; but (i) it seems at least possible that the Vedda language may remain to some extent in ritual use among them; and (ii) I am inclined to think that in the ceremony here described the invocation of Rahu Yaku, described by the Seligmanns on pp. 234-9 of *The Veddas*, was combined with the worship of Amma and Kapalpo, described by [114 197]

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of an exhortation to the villagers not to be afraid, as no harm would come to them. It need hardly be said that such a prophecy was extremely *à propos* from my point of view. I began to think that perhaps the Chief Headman was right and the time spent upon the ceremony was not wholly wasted.

The two principal dancers at length finished their dance and returned to their station near the shrine; and in their place ten or a dozen people, with a very old man as *choregos*, danced a similar dance, threading their way among the ranks of the people in single file. From time to time they would suddenly break off their dance, and rushing back tumultuously to the open space about the "maypole" would beat upon the pole with the bunches of leaves which each of them held in either hand, crying "*Wach! wach! wach!*" The Chief Headman, himself a Hindu, gave me the following interesting interpretation of the symbolism of this dance:—"The pole represents Brahma, the Source of Life, and the dancers wandering about among the people represent human life, at the end of which the soul returns to its Creator for a while with glad cries."

Later this dance was again danced by the same persons, led by the two red-jacketed principal dancers. Then the announcement was made that the goddess was coming from the river, and the two principal dancers began a very solemn, ecstatic dance under a canopy. As they danced the excitement grew tenser and tenser and their motions became more and more convulsive. They were firmly held by those near them,—a precaution necessary, the Chief Headman assured me, to prevent them from running amok among the spectators,—and seemed to struggle to shake off the restraint thus put upon them. Gradually, however, their efforts slackened, and they finally sank unconscious upon the ground.[9]

them on pp. 335-9, and that the "principal dancers" mentioned were not coast Veddas, but were brought in from outside. The point is one of some interest; but as, unfortunately, I did not go into it at the time, I do not feel at all certain about it.

[9] The Seligmanns say on p. 134 of *The Veddas*, "Most sincere practitioners whom we interrogated in different localities agreed that . . . they never entirely lost consciousness." After the dance here described the

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[23 It was now two o'clock in the morning, and, though the ceremony was by no means concluded, I had seen enough of it to appreciate its general nature and it behoved me to get a little sleep in preparation for the day's work before me. Accompanied by the Chief Headman I made my way back along the jungle paths and across the open spaces, still white in the moonlight,—with the throb of the tom-tom behind me becoming fainter and fainter as I pursued my way,—to the quiet of my lodging.

R. B. NAISH.

[79b dancers lay upon the ground and certainly appeared to be genuinely
78] and completely unconscious for about ten minutes, *i.e.*, up to the time at which I left the clearing.